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Carter's Nightmare

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, April 20—If the Senate of the United States had rejected the Panama treaty, the Carter Administration was ready with a series of actions designed to minimize the damage. The contingency plan was as follows:

Immediately after a negative vote in the Senate, President Carter planned to summon Senate leaders of both parties to meet with him in the Oval Office to consider the military and political consequences.

That same evening, the President planned a brief televised statement to the nation, including an appeal to the Panamanians to maintain order and avoid any provocative moves on the Canal Zone.

An air and sealift of military reinforcements was planned in case the United States troops in the zone were not able to handle massive demonstrations or acts of sabotage.

All U.S. diplomatic missions in Latin America would have been placed on alert, though it was assumed in Washington, regardless of precautions, that several of them would have been fire-bombed.

It was also planned that on the night of the vote, the President would take the Senate leaders to the National Security Council's Situation Room in the White House for a more detailed briefing by Zbigniew Brzezinski, head of the N.S.C., by Admiral Turner of the C.I.A. and by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Since the treaty did finally squeak through with 68 votes, all this may seem a little melodramatic. The Administration did think or at least hope that two or three Senators would come forward and vote for the treaty, regardless of their own doubts and political risks, but only if their votes were essential to assure passage of the treaty. Mr. Carter could not count on this, however, and had to consider what to do if the Senate failed to ratify.

It is only by talking to officials who had to plan for defeat of the treaty that you understand the anxiety of this Administration about the erosion of its authority and the decline of the President's public support.

They had no doubt that there would have been a wild emotional convulsion by the Panamanians if the treaty had been rejected, or any doubt that U.S. troops on the ground, with air and sea reinforcements if necessary, could have restored order. But there were serious doubts here that this could have been done without the canal being sabotaged and without casualties leading to anti-U.S. demonstrations all

main concern of the President and his principal aides. There is now a kind of nightmare in this city. Lyndon Johnson retired from the White House because he lost public support over his Vietnam policy. Richard Nixon was driven from office by his efforts to impose Presidential power at the Watergate. Jerry Ford was an unelected President with an unelected Vice President, and lacking popular support, had to govern by veto.

The nightmare in the Carter Administration on the night of the Panama vote was that a dramatic defeat on the treaty, followed by bitter recriminations between the White House and the Congress at home, and violent anti-U.S. demonstrations abroad, would certainly have weakened Mr. Carter in the critical negotiations coming up with the Soviet Union, at the economic summit in July and in the Middle East and Africa.

It is not easy to explain why two-thirds of the Senators voted for the Panama treaty when most of them thought two-thirds of the voters in their states were against it. Some voted for it on moral grounds because they thought it was the fair and right thing to do. Many equally concerned Sena-

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tors voted against it because they thought it was not either right or fair.

But when you talk to the doubters in the Senate who voted for it in the end even at the risk of being defeated in the November elections, at least a few of them, maybe even a decisive few, voted on wider historic grounds, and decided that Jimmy Carter still had almost three years to go, and that the United States didn't need one more crippled President.

So this was not a vote of confidence in Mr. Carter, even by his party in the Senate. It was a suspended sentence. He was getting into deep trouble in the nation, in the alliance, and in his negotiations on the most alarming problems of world affairs. Recently he has not merely been criticized but battered by the American press, whose judgments that he is an "indecisive, moralistic rejected loser" have been picked up by the newspapers in the free world, and savaged by the Communist propaganda apparatus.

But if everything seemed in jeopardy here on the Panama treaty for a few days, nothing has been irretrievably lost. The close call on Panama has forced a reappraisal by Mr. Carter of his methods, his Cabinet, his White House staff, and his priorities. The Panama "victory" if that's the right